

When Love Is Disgrace and Grace Is Loathsome

Contronymy as a (Datable?) Feature
of Hebrew Diachrony

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Overview

1. What Is Contronymy?
2. Contronymy in Linguistics
3. Identifying Contronymy (Method)
4. Cases in the Hebrew Bible
5. Conclusion

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1. What Is Contronymy?

- Polysemy: one word, multiple meanings
 - Examples in standard Heb. lexica: דבר, רוח, אלהים, ב, ו
 - In 1679, Noldius registered **76 meanings** of ו (Steiner 2000)!
- Contronymy: “A case of polysemy in which one sense is in some respect the opposite of another.” (CODL)
 - Examples in English:
 - to dust (v) – “to rid of dust/to sprinkle dust”
 - to cleave (v) – “to separate/to join”
 - sanction (n) – “approval/penalty”
 - fast (adj) – “quick/firmly fixed, immovable”

1. What Is Contronymy?

- Why does it matter?
 - Semantics → it is a problem for lexicographers, semanticists
 - Cognitive linguistics → it is an insight into cultural worldview
 - Historical linguistics → it is the result of semantic change
- Research question:

Can investigation of contronymic roots enlighten discussions of dating specific texts in the Bible?

2. Contronymy in Linguistics

As recognized in:

2.1 General Linguistics

2.2 Ancient Semitic Languages

2.3 Hebrew Studies

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2.1 General Linguistics

- Names

- English: contranym, antagonym, antilogy, auto-antonym, enantiosemy, polarized roots, Janus words, etc.
- Arabic: *'addād* (“opposites”; sg. *ḍidd*)
- German: Gegensinn (“opposite-sense”)
- Hebrew: ניגוד עצמי (“self-contradiction”), ההומונימים, המהופכים (“inverted homonyms*”)

2.1 General Linguistics

- A universal phenomenon
 - E.g., Indo-European languages
 - Latin: *religio* “religious piety/religious offense”
 - German: *bannen* “banish/captivate”
 - E.g., Eskimo-Aleut languages
 - Yupik: *inlu* “mate/adversary”
- Not only within a language but *intra* language families
 - English *to ravel* “to untangle”; Danish *ravelen* “to tangle, fray”
 - **Isogloss** – a boundary of regional variants → the variant itself

2.2 Ancient Semitic Languages

- Akkadian – a few good cases culled by H. Tawil (2009)
 - *buštu* – “shame/dignity” (cf. Heb. בִּזְיוֹן “shame” only)
 - *le'û/ה"לא* – “be able [Akkad.]/not be able [Heb.],” etc.
- Aramaic – several clear cases
 - פִּרְקָא – “destroy/save” (attested in OA+/IA only)
- Arabic – even the name *'addād* is a contronym, “equals”
“Every Arabic word is said to have four meanings: its primary meaning—**the precise opposite**—something obscene—something related to a camel!” (Bateson 1967)

2.2 Ancient Semitic Languages

- Examples commonly cited:
 - *wataba*/י"ש"ב – “spring up [Arab.]/sit down [Heb.]”
 - *jawn* “white/black”
 - *ṣarīm* “day/night”
 - *jalal* “s.t. significant/trifle”
- Medieval Arabists were very enthusiastic, 9th–13th cc.
 - Some **400 cases** were adduced!—*ad infinitum*
 - But analyses by 20th-c. scholars (Nöldeke, Hospers, Cohen) showed these to be for a variety of reasons, mostly spurious:
 - Dialects and diglossia (useful, behaves as a microcosm of languages)
 - Rhetorical use (euphemism, dysphemism, irony), metaphony (different vocalizations, same lexical unit), creative exegesis of the Quran, textual variants in the Quran

2.3 Hebrew Studies

- Medieval Hebraists and commentators 10th–13th cc.
 - R. David Kimchi (“Radak”) ספר השרשים (“Book of Roots”) an etymological dictionary
- Revival of interest in the Arabic / Hebrew phenomenon
 - K. Abel (1885) > E. Landau (1896) > **Th. Nöldeke (1910)**
 - R. Gordis; G. R. Driver; J. Blau; J. Barr; G. Zarfati; **J. de Prenter**
 - Academy of the Hebrew Language
 - Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics
 - Semantics of Ancient Hebrew Database

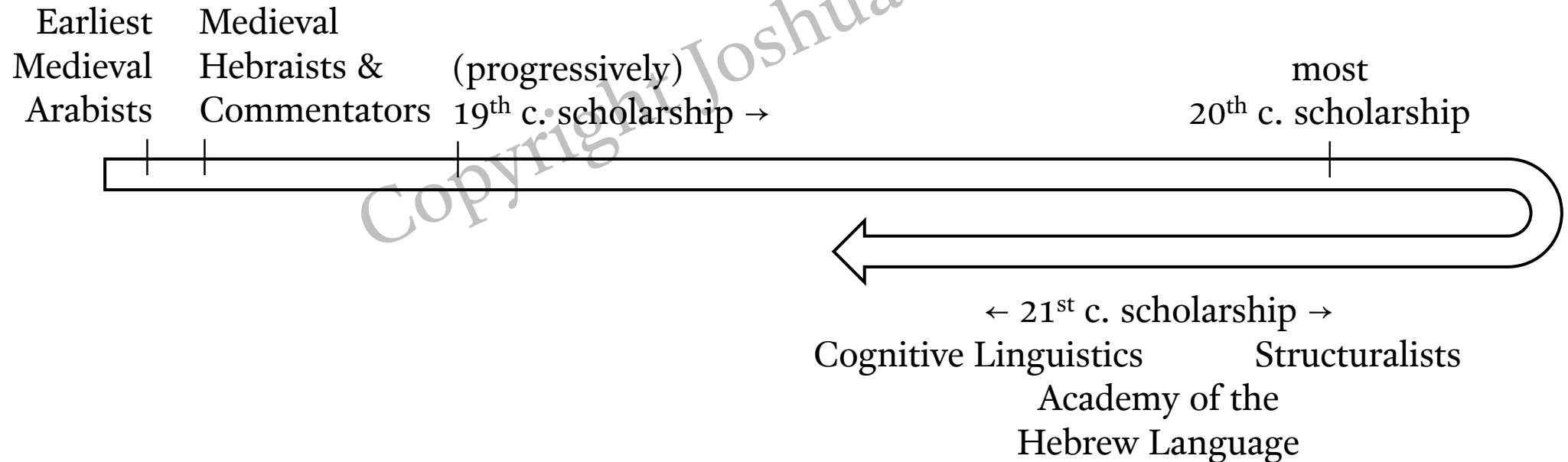
2.3 Hebrew Studies

“meaning maximalism”

(favor polysemy)

“meaning minimalism”

(favor homonymy)



3. Identifying Contronymy (Method)

3.1 Cognitive Semantic Approach

3.2 Positively Identifying Contronymy

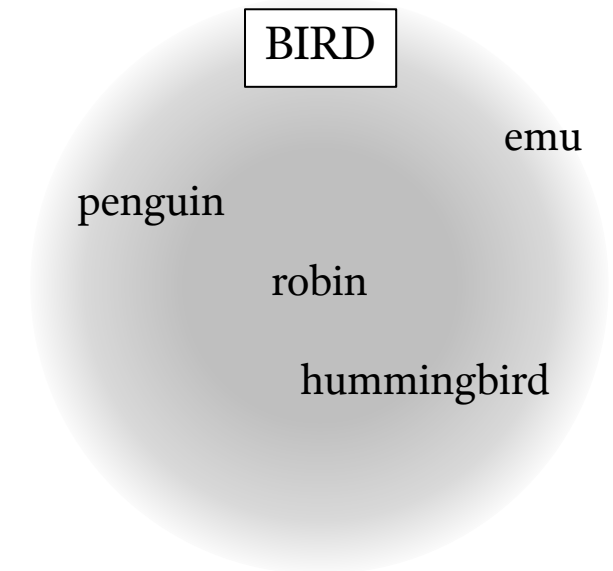
3.3 Phenomena to Exclude

3.4 Limitations

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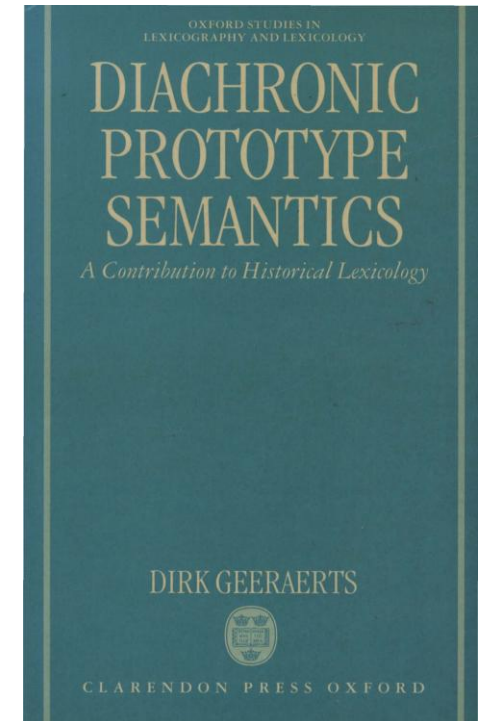
3.1 Cognitive Semantic Approach

- Encyclopedic cultural knowledge informs meaning
- Speakers categorize their “mental lexicon” into overlapping semantic domains of “family resemblance”
 - Prototypical (salient) category member(s) at the center
 - Less prototypical members toward the periphery
 - Overlapping, “fuzzy” boundaries with other domains
- Polysemy is normal



3.1 Cognitive Semantic Approach

- D. Geeraerts, *Diachronic Prototype Semantics* (1997)
 - “Polysemy is, roughly, the synchronic reflection of diachronic-semantic change.” (6)
 - Through time, words acquire multiple senses through extension.
 - E.g., metaphor, metonymy, generalization, specification, assimilation, etc.
 - As senses multiply, words acquire internally related clusters (subdomains) of meaning, with their own sub-prototypes.



3.1 Cognitive Semantic Approach

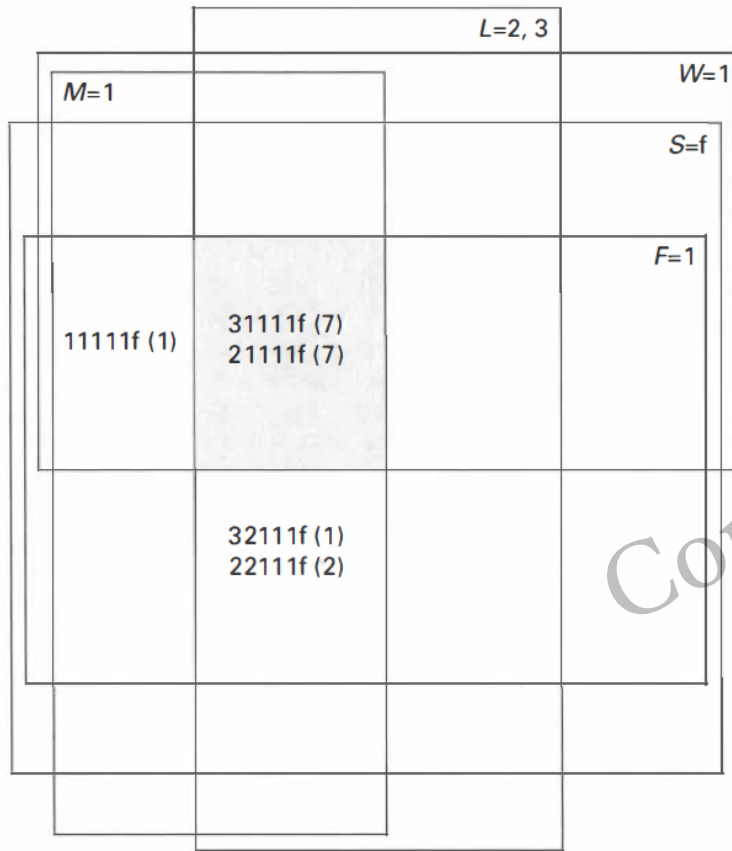


FIG. 2.1. The semasiological range of application of the category *legging* in 1988

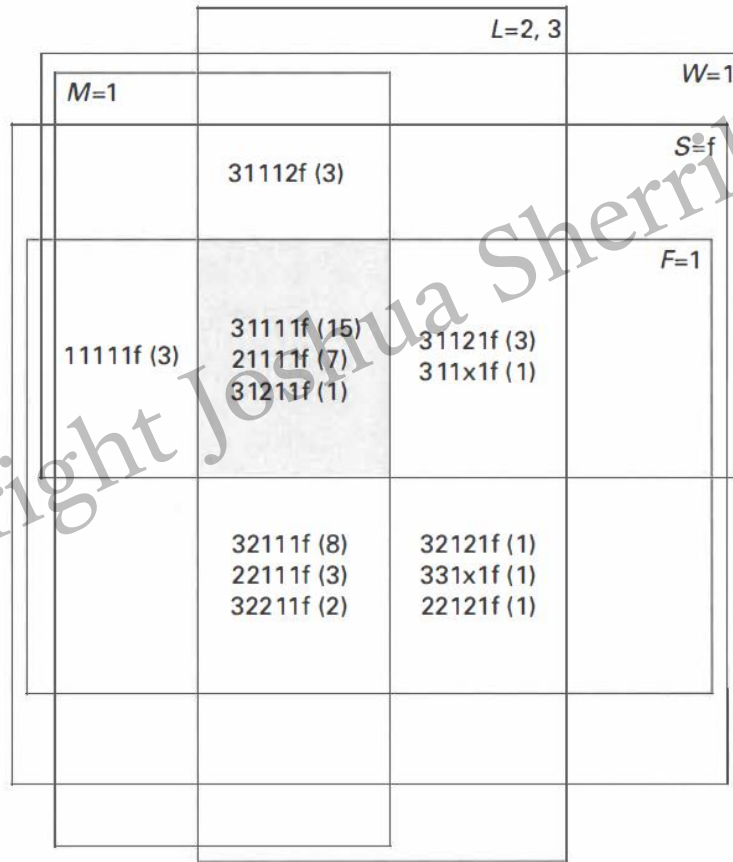


FIG. 2.3. The semasiological range of application of the category *legging* in 1990

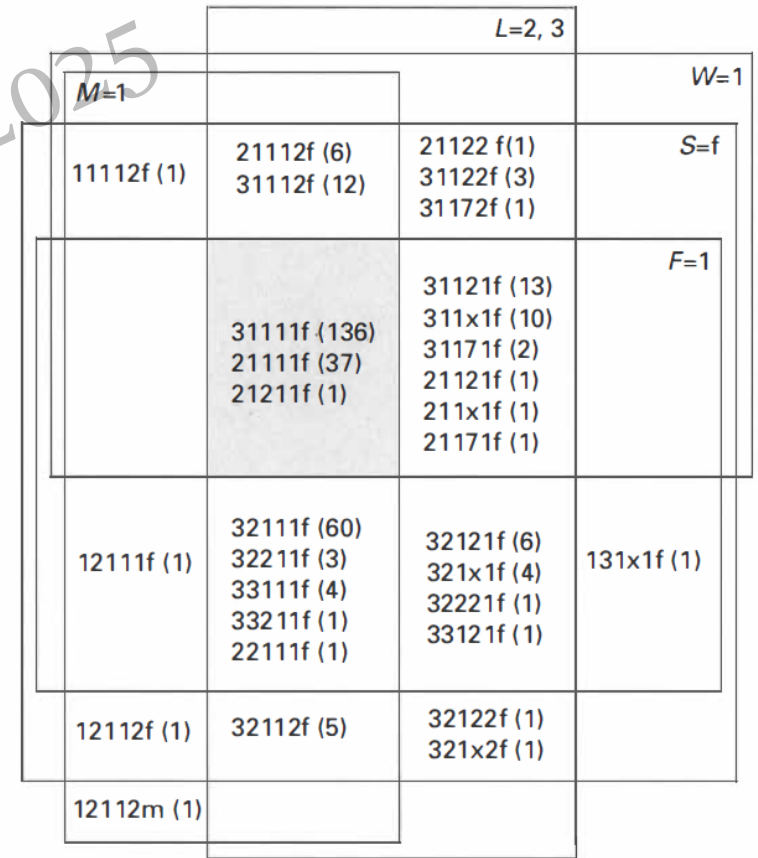


FIG. 2.5. The semasiological range of application of the category *legging* in 1992

3.1 Cognitive Semantic Approach

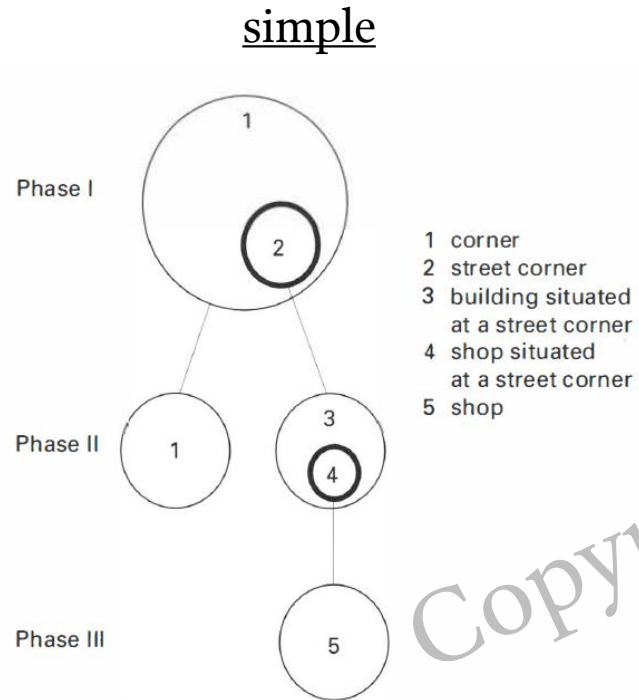


FIG. 2.10. Schematic representation of the development of Dutch *winkel*

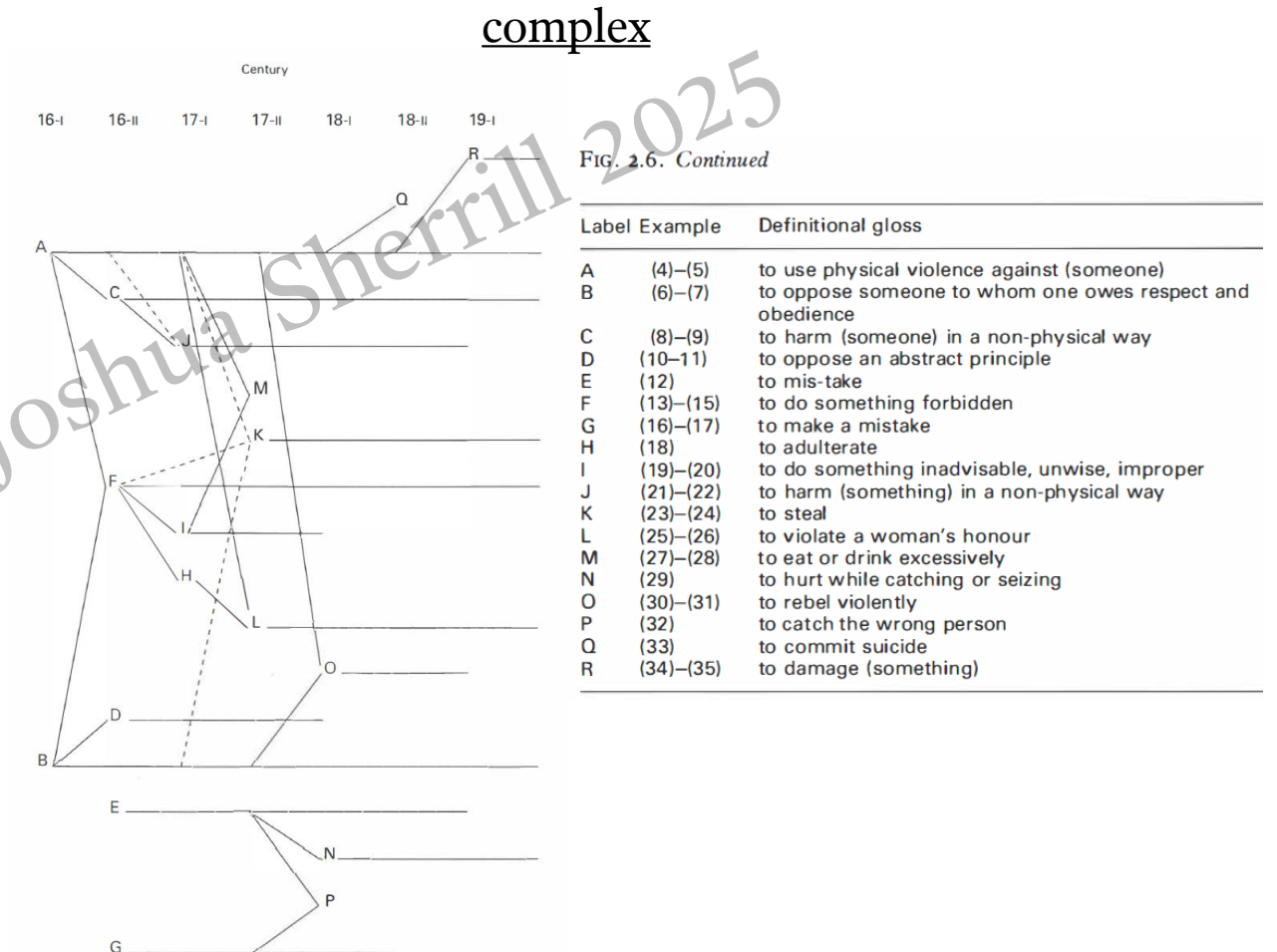


FIG. 2.6. The diachronic structure of *ver grijpen*

3.1 Cognitive Semantic Approach

- Has this approach been applied to contronymy before?
- J. A. de Prenter, “The Contrastive Polysemous Meaning of Ḥērem in the Book of Joshua: A Cognitive Linguistic Approach,” *Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense* (2010).
 - חֶרֶם “consecrated/desecrated” (Josh 7:1, 11/7:12, 13, 15)
 - Her intro: “Because the different meanings of the term are located in two separate redactional layers, i.e. in Deuteronomistic (DtrH) and Priestly (RedP) texts, previous research regarded the polysemy of the concept as the result of a diachronic semantic development.” (1)

3.1 Cognitive Semantic Approach

“consecrated”

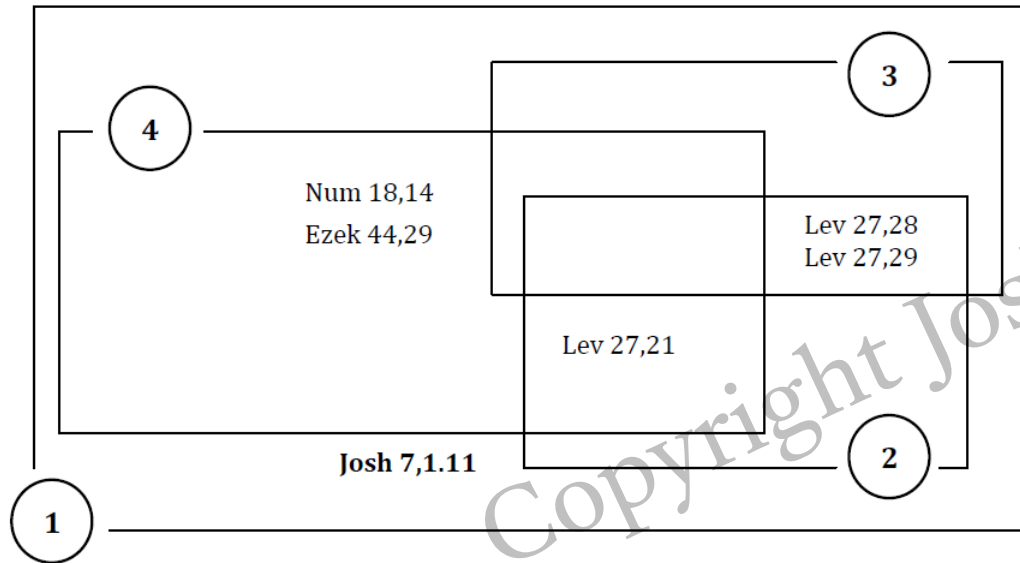


Figure 4: Josh 7,1.11 as peripheral senses of Prototype 1

“desecrated”

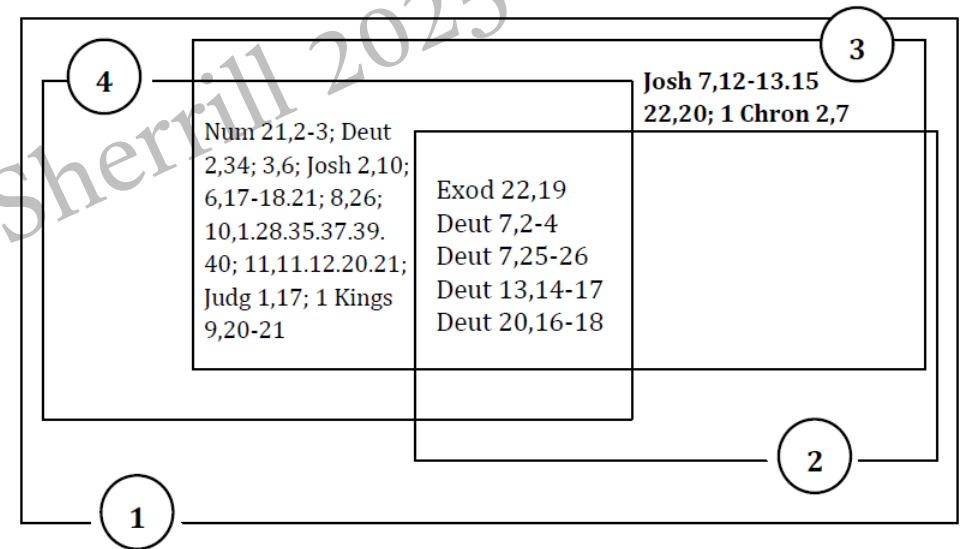


Figure 5: Josh 7,12-13.15 as peripheral senses of Prototype 2

Josh 7:11b וְגַם לָקְחוּ מִן־הַחֵרֶם וְגַם גָּנְבוּ וְגַם כָּחְשׁוּ וְגַם שָׂמוּ בְכֵלֵיהֶם:

and they have taken from the *ḥērem*, and they have also stolen, deceived and put it among their belongings.

Josh 7:12a

עָרְף יַפְנֹוּ לַפָּנָי אִיבֵיהֶם כִּי הָיוּ לְחֵרֶם

they turn their backs before their enemies, for they have become *ḥērem*.

3.1 Cognitive Semantic Approach

- Her conclusion:
 - “The term can be defined as a polysemous taboo concept signifying either a consecrated or a desecrated status. Both denotations however share the general sense of ‘separation’ and ‘irredeemability’. There is thus no need for diachronic argumentation in order to explain the different meanings of חָרָם. When the two denotations of the term are examined in their own right, the two categories show complex lexical structures in which different aspects of the category overlap.” (15)
- In other words, the text was built around the synchronic contronymy of חָרָם already in existence
- She drew insights for the layers (∴ dating) of the text

3.2 Positively Identifying Contronymy

- Could other conclusions be drawn for other texts, though consistent with these same principles?
- Research question: **Can investigation of contronymic roots enlighten discussions of dating specific texts in the Bible?**
- How must I investigate?

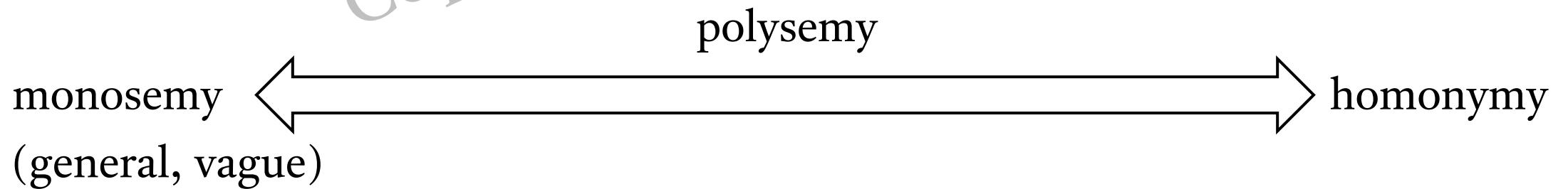
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3.2 Positively Identifying Contronymy

- I have chosen **roots** (lemmas), and not lexemes only
 - Root = an abstract, a recognizable consonant sequence but “not a guide in itself to the sense of the words” (Barr 1961)
 - “Root fallacy” = English *nice* “pleasant” is f/ Latin *nescius* “ignorant,” so in current use, a *nice* person is a * “pleasant idiot”
 - Root is nevertheless a psychological/cognitive reality (cf. iconicity), and so a valid basis for investigating development
 - E. van Wolde (1994); J. A. de Prenter (2010); S. Shead (2011); C. H. J. van der Merwe (2018)
 - The tendency is to diversify meanings, not consolidate, which points to more monosemic origins and paradigmatic iconicity

3.2 Positively Identifying Contronymy

- I must recognize when a root is truly **polysemous** (ambiguous), not simply general (vague)
 - Ambiguous = a forced choice, incompatible options
 - Vague = unmarked for choice, i.e., a *vox media* or neutral sense
 - V. Evans (2019); J. Taylor (2003); Geeraerts (1993)
- ... and not only homonymy (though they are related)



3.2 Positively Identifying Contronymy

- I must recognize when polysemous senses are truly **contronymy** (auto-antonyms) (Murphy 2010)
 - **Contrary** – gradable; e.g., *short/tall, love/hate*
 - **Complementary** – contradictory; e.g., *even/odd, dead/alive*
 - **Converse** – the same relation from different perspectives; e.g., *parent/child, give/receive*
 - **Reversive** – the undoing of some action; e.g., *tie/untie*

3.2 Positively Identifying Contronymy

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3.3 Contronymy True and False to Exclude

- Interpretive contronymy
- Translational contronymy
 - assumed based on cross-cultural translation difficulties
 - e.g., -ב > English “with/against”; לְאַחֵר “future/backward”
- Antiphrasis (irony)
 - Euphemism: בִּרְאָה = “curse” (7x in Job; 1 Kgs; Pss)
 - Dysphemism: רִפְאִים “giants” (cf. Aram. רפא, Ug. *rpy* “be weak”)

3.3 Contronymy True and False to Exclude

- Agent-Patient Transfer (often via heterosemy)
 - *rent* = (v) “pay to use s.t.”; (n) “what is paid for use of s.t.”
 - מכר = מָכַר “he sold”; מָכָר “a purchase, betrothal”
- Privatives
 - English (*anti-*, *un-*); German (*un-*, *ver-*, *ent-*); Hebrew (Piel*)
 - שָׁרַשׁ = Q “plant (s.t.)”; Pi “uproot” (Ps 52:5 [7])
 - סָקַל = Q “stone (s.o.)”; Pi “remove stones” (Isa 5:2; 62:10)
 - חָטָא = Q “sin”; Pi “cleanse from sin” (Ps 51:7 [9])

3.3 Contronymy True and False to Exclude

- Metaphony

- הוּא = “he/she” in the Pentateuch (a *qere perpetuum*)

- But QH היא/הוא, Moab. אה/??, Ug. *huwa/hiya* < ? **hu(wa)*, *hiw(a)* and thus an archaic form (Hornkohl 2024; Elitzur; Qimron)

- Alternatively, this an epicene (vagueness specifically for male/female)

- Morphology

- active/passive senses via differing stems (*binyanim*)

3.4 Limitations

- *Biblical* Hebrew is a dead language (no living speakers)
- Small corpus (<0.5M word)
- Rare phenomenon (some are *hapax legomena*)
- Not always yielding insights for datability of a text
- Thus:
 - Focus on complementary and/or contrary opposition for the most oppositional salience (and ∴ traceability)
 - Focus on isoglosses for chronology

4.1. Cases in the Hebrew Bible: חס"ד

Prov 25:9–10

רִיבְךָ רִיב אֶת־רֵעֶךָ וְסוֹד אַחֵר אַל־תִּגְלֶה:
פֶּן־יִחַסְדְּךָ שָׁמַע וְדַבַּרְתָּ לֹא תָשׁוּב:

Plead your case with your neighbor, / And do not reveal the secret of another,
Lest he who hears it bring חָסֵד upon you, / And the bad report about you will
not turn away.

Prov 14:34

צְדָקָה תִרְוַם־גּוֹי
וְחָסֵד לְאֲמִים חַטָּאת:

Righteousness exalts a nation, / But sin is a חָסֵד to any people.

4.1. Cases in the Hebrew Bible: חס"ד

Lev 20:17

וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-יִקַּח אֶת-אָחִתּוֹ בֵּת-אָבִיו אוֹ בֵּת-אִמּוֹ
וְרָאָה אֶת-עֶרְוֹתָהּ וְהִיא-תִּרְאֶה אֶת-עֶרְוֹתָיו
חֲסִד הוא וְנִכְרְתוּ לְעֵינֵי בְנֵי עַמָּם
עֶרְוֹת אָחִתּוֹ גְּלָה עֲוֹנוֹ יִשָּׂא:

If there is a man who takes his sister, his father's daughter, or his mother's daughter, so that he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a חֲסִד; and they shall be cut off in the sight of the sons of their people. He has uncovered his sister's nakedness; he bears his **guilt**.

4.1. Cases in the Hebrew Bible: חס"ד

- *HALOT* (|| BDB, *DCH*):

- I חֶסֶד: → I חסד:

- JArm. חֶסֶדָּא, Syr. *hes/zdā*, CPArm. *hsdyn*, Mnd. חִיזְדָּא; ? Arm. lw.

- 1. shame Lv 20:17 Pr 14:34; 2. abuse Sir 41:22 (Marg.) = SirMIV:3, חסדים 1QM iii 6 (alt. II). †

- II חֶסֶד (ca. 250 ×; sg. 234 ×, 125 × Ps): → חֶסֶדִּי and II חסד:

- MHb., JArm.tg חֶסֶדָּא, Syr. *hesdā*, CPArm. *hs/zd*, Mnd. חִיזְדָּא, everywhere < Heb.; II חסד, Arb. *hašada* to come together for aid

- 1. joint obligation between people, loyalty; 2. in God's relationship with people, faithfulness, goodness, graciousness; 3. a) godly actions, achievements resulting from solidarity, b) (God's) proofs of mercy

4.1. Cases in the Hebrew Bible: חס"ד

- *HALOT* (|| BDB, *DCH*):

- I חסד:

- JArm. to be ashamed, Sam. and Syr. CPArm. Mnd. slander; Arb. *ḥasada* and Tigr. *ḥasda* to envy; ? Arm. lw.

- pi: impf. יִחַסְדֵּם: to bring shame Pr 25:10 Sir 14:2 †

- II חסד:

- MHb. pt. pass. to be lovely, godly

- hitp: impf. תִּחַסְדֶּם: to act as a חסיד Ps 18:26 / 2S 22:26. †

4.1. Cases in the Hebrew Bible: ד"סח

- Nöldeke (1910: 91):

„Auffallend ist es aber etwas, daß in zwei verhältnismäßig alten Stellen das Hebräische die aramäische Bedeutung zeigt, was doch kaum anders als durch Entlehnung zu erklären ist.“

[“It is striking, however, that in two relatively old passages, the Hebrew shows the Aramaic meaning, **which can hardly be explained other than by borrowing.**”]

- Could not Lev 20:17 attest an archaic contronymy also?
- Proverbs could as well or attest a genre-driven Aramaism (via “semantic polygenesis”), or to Late Biblical Hebrew.

4.2. Cases in the Hebrew Bible: חנ"ן

Job 19:17

רוּחִי זָרָה לְאִשְׁתִּי וְחַנְתִּי לְבָנַי בְּטֶנִי:

My breath is **offensive** to my wife, / **And I am חנ"ן** to the sons of my womb.

<contra>

Exod 33:19

וְחַנְתִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֶחֶן וְרַחֲמֵי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר אֶרְחַם:

I will be חנ"ן to whom **I will be חנ"ן**, and **I will show compassion** on whom I will show compassion.

4.2. Cases in the Hebrew Bible: חנ"ן

- *HALOT* (|| BDB, *DCH*):

- I חנן:

- Ug. *hnn*, EA *yiḥnanuni*, Ph., Arm., Arb. *ḥanna* to feel sympathy, to have pity; Akk. *enēnu*
- qal: to favor someone (pt. gracious); pi. make gracious; etc. ...

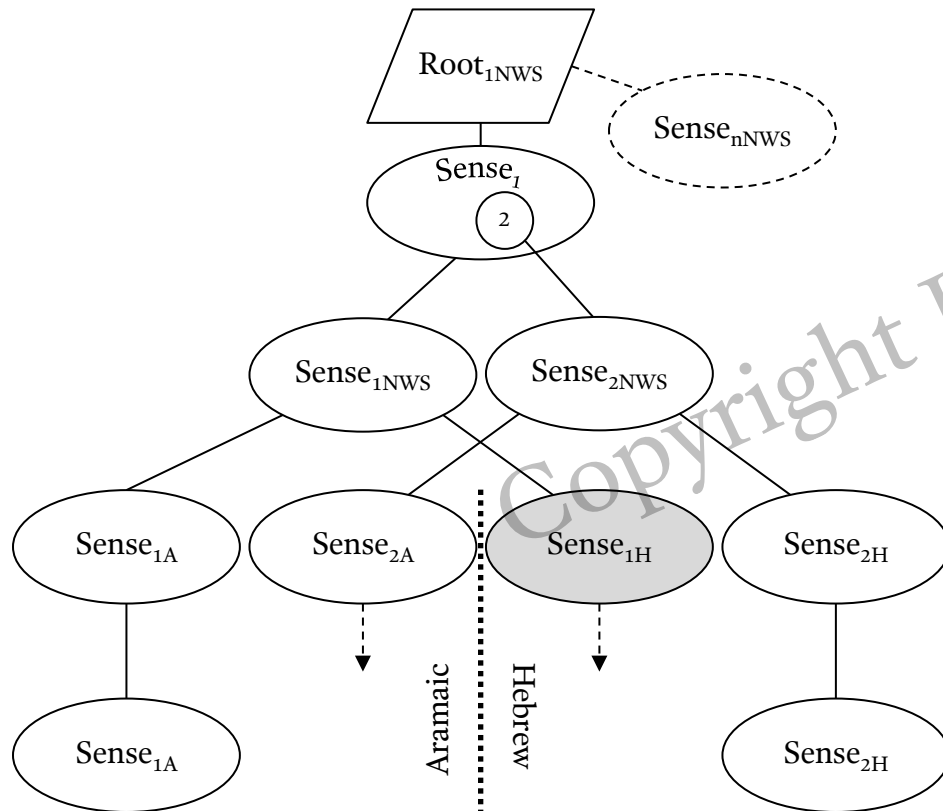
- II חנן:

- Syr., Arb. *ḥanna* to stink, Syr. *ḥanninā* rancid, Tigr. *ḥanana* to smell
- qal: pf. וְחִנְנִי: to be fetid, loathsome Jb 19:17. †

- Why not an archaic contronymy? Job's poetry is already considered archaic on other grounds.

5. Conclusion

Conronymic Isoglosses
(via Dissimilation)



- To form a domain-prototype diagram would require more data.
- Perhaps a cross-linguistic (*NWS) domain-prototype diagram could be formed in the future.
- Yes, conronymy can contribute to diachronic discussions and the dating of texts, alongside other data.
- Two cases of conronymy, חס"ד and חנ"ן, correspond to isoglosses that fit well as archaisms.
- When was “love disgrace and grace loathsome?” Maybe in ABH.

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